

Environmental Impact of Mining for Precious Metals

Increasing consumer demands for products fuels and empowers a company's market presence. If lucrative enough, a company will often times push the limits of moral behavior. A prime example of this is the invasive mining of precious metals. Gold, copper, and diamonds, although seemingly abundant and easily accessible to the average American, are just three of these materials that are mined in such a destructive way. These mining operations are often found in developing countries that can ill afford to lose the economic boost that the natural resources allow. Places such as Indonesia, the Amazon, and even French Guiana are all subject to this environmental destruction.

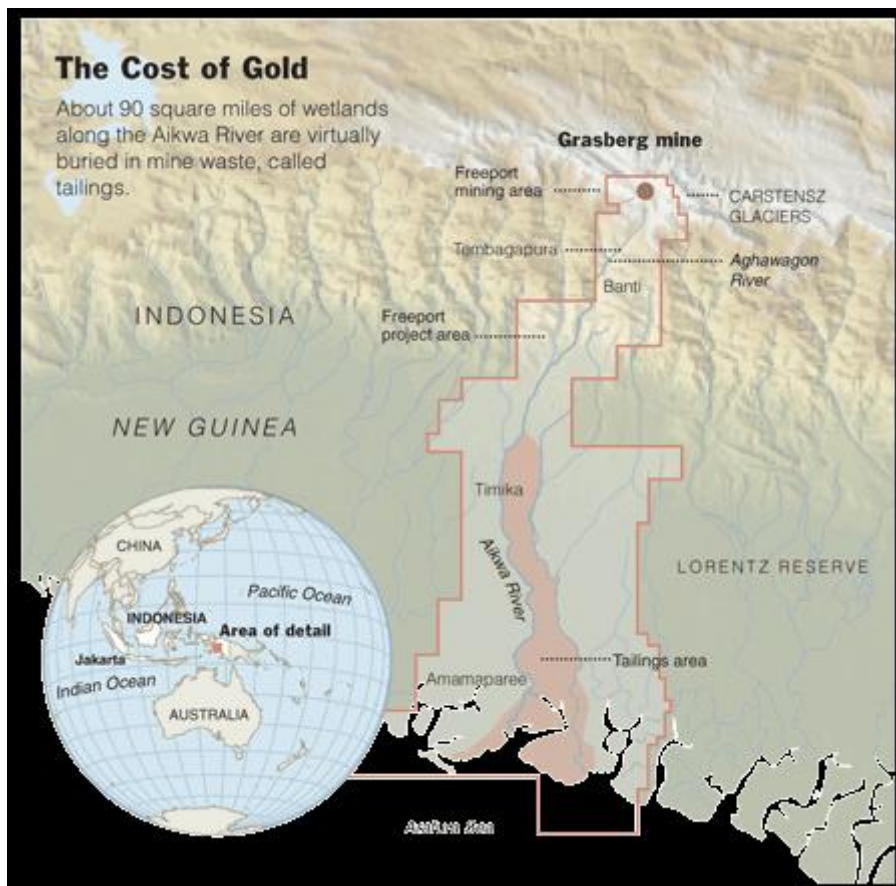
In the mountains of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, gold and copper, along with other minerals, are being mined. Originally Mount Ertsberg, twenty years of relentless mining operations have converted the once majestic mountain into a 600-meter deep hole. Each day, the operation estimates that 700,000 tons of waste rock is produced each day; creating a rubble pile 900 feet deep which stretches over three square miles. To better understand the amount of rock removal, 35 tons of rock must be excavated in order to produce a single gold ring. According to the New York Times, satellite images of the mine shows that "almost a billion tons of mine waste ... [has been] dumped directly into a [nearby] jungle river" which, prior to the company's occupation of the area, had been one of the world's most pristine environments. To even begin mining for gold, forests must first be clear cut only after can leaching, a process containing cyanide, be used to extract microscopic gold particles. This cyanide leaks into water and streams thus contaminating any natural sources of drinking water and contaminating surrounding aquifers.



<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/27/international/asia/27gold.html>

Multinational corporations and indigenous are two stakeholders who are directly affected by these situations. Economic hardships in developing countries where mining takes place, allows corporations to exploit the indigenous people for low-wage, physically demanding, jobs. Within the next 20 years, it is predicted that “half of all gold produced... will come from indigenous lands”, bringing more economic prosperity to the country but destroying the natural habitat. While multinational corporations profit from these destructive behaviors, they turn a blind eye to the sufferings of the people. Many of these people are spiritually connected to their land, but see their traditions vanish when mining companies come in and destroy it.

Until this problem has been properly addressed, we will continue to see the decline of pristine environments into industrial wastelands. Delicate species of native wildlife will slip away first and thus affecting the biodiversity in the area which could cause a domino effect. Native inhabitants will also continue to lose their land, livelihood, and cultural traditions. To help prevent this from continuing, the demand for these materials must be decreased. It is not practical to think that another mineral can take the place of gold or diamonds in the eyes of a loving couple. However semi-conductors, other than gold, can be used in electronic devices to decrease the demand.



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Map showing the extended effects of a single gold mine

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/27/international/asia/27gold.html>



Destruction of rainforest due to gold mining

<http://survivalacres.com/wordpress/?p=1573>



Aerial view of deforestation due to gold mining in the Peruvian rainforest

<http://rainforests.mongabay.com/0808.htm>

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Relevant video: <http://cnettv.cnet.com/av/video/cbsnews/atlantia2/player>